

NAME

The Politics of the Olympics

DATE

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DURATION

43m 21s

10 SPEAKERS

Nick Capodice

Hannah McCarthy

Archival Seoul 1988 Olympics Commercial

Archival

Jules Boykoff

Nancy Qian

Jimmy Carter

Speaker3

Tommie Smith

Raven Saunders

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] Nick Capodice

Can I do the John Williams Olympic theme of mouth trumpet?

[00:00:03] Hannah McCarthy

Of course.

[00:00:03] Nick Capodice

I think the Olympics theme is one of the unsung heroes of the John Williams repertoire. It's one of my favorites. It's up there with Raiders of the Lost Ark. My TV, when I was a kid, couldn't get any channels like local or cable or anything. All we could do is watch the VCR. So my grandmother every four years would mail about 20 tapes of the Olympics to me and my sister, and we'd watch them religiously.

[00:00:34] Hannah McCarthy

What was your favorite year?

[00:00:36] Nick Capodice

1988, Seoul. Reebok. Reebok, Reebok. And you thought everything was happening in Seoul? We know all the commercials. Great Run winners give their best all the way to the finish line.

[00:00:47] Hannah McCarthy

Did you love it for the commercials or for the athletes?

[00:00:50] Nick Capodice

For both? Because we didn't have TVs, so the commercials were just as joyous.

[00:00:55] Archival Seoul 1988 Olympics Commercial

And you thought everything was happening in Seoul?

[00:01:03] Hannah McCarthy

Every two years, people who represent the absolute best in their field, the best in the world descend on one of the globe's cities and show us exactly what they can do.

[00:01:18] Archival

Usain Bolt!

[00:01:30] Archival

A perfect score, 10.0 for Nadia Comaneci, a perfect score. Cannot be, no one can run that fast He's done it!

[00:01:50] Hannah McCarthy

Billions of people tune in to watch the celebration of athleticism, of commitment and excellence. And that's what the Olympics are all about, right? The athletes.

[00:02:17] Jules Boykoff

The Olympics are political. They have been political for a very long time, and they go back to being political all the way to the beginning.

[00:02:24] Hannah McCarthy

This is Jules Boykoff. The guy who shattered my understanding of the Olympic Games. He's also professor of politics and government at Pacific University in Oregon and author of four books on the politics of the Olympic Games.

[00:02:37] Jules Boykoff

In fact, if anybody tells you that the Olympics are not political, there is a very good chance that they are making their living off of the Olympic Games.

[00:02:46] Hannah McCarthy

And that, my friends, is what we are digging into today. I'm Hannah McCarthy.

[00:02:51] Nick Capodice

I'm Nick Capodice.

[00:02:51] Hannah McCarthy

And this is Civics 101. Today we are exploring the global games and how they are used by the United States and others around the world. We'll talk about what it takes to host the games, what the games do for a nation and what it means when you refuse to attend. Welcome to the Olympics.

[00:03:14] Nick Capodice

Now, I always thought the Olympics were a pretty wholesome affair. So can we get into this whole Olympics being shattered for you thing?

[00:03:21] Hannah McCarthy

All right. Let's just say I have a lot more to think about when I binge watch floor routines.

[00:03:27] Jules Boykoff

1936, there was the Berlin Olympics where Hitler made the games extremely political, and he used the games as a trampoline for his invasion into Europe after those games

[00:03:38] Archival

the German team as hosts come last and then Germany's Führer declares the 11th

[00:03:42] Jules Boykoff

Olympiad officially open.

[00:03:44]

fall forward from there to the Cold War era, where basically the Olympics became a proxy battlefield between the United States and the Soviet Union.

[00:03:52] Hannah McCarthy

United States Olympic Committee voted to boycott the Summer Olympic Games in Moscow.

[00:03:56] Jules Boykoff

Shimmy forward from there. 2014. The Olympics happened in Sochi, Russia. Incredibly political. I mean, the host there in Russia had just passed an anti LGBTQ law that was very much clashing with principles in the Olympic Charter.

[00:04:12] Archival

President Vladimir Putin wants to make it clear that gay visitors are welcome, but he's also keen to stress the country's ban on promoting homosexuality among minors.

[00:04:21] Jules Boykoff

And so that was political, and it raised the political hackles of numerous athletes from the United States, for example, and diplomats from around the world. Then you go forward a little bit further. 2018 the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in South Korea, where the International Olympic Committee played an active role, bringing together the governments of North Korea and South Korea to form a united team for those games.

[00:04:43] Archival

Setting foot in South Korea tonight, these North Korean Olympians are making history.

[00:04:49] Jules Boykoff

Obviously, every one of those examples show that the Olympics are political.

[00:04:54] Hannah McCarthy

By the way, the modern Olympic Games were started in the 1890s by a French aristocrat as a nod to the ancient Greek sporting event. So we've been at this for well over 100 years. And if you're listening to this thinking, excuse me, Hitler used the games to pave the way to his European invasion? I promise you we will come back to that. But the point is, if you embark, as I did on a happy go lucky investigation of the world's greatest celebration of athleticism, you will find that there is a lot simmering just under the five ring surface. And to get there, we have to start here.

[00:05:30] Jules Boykoff

If you want to understand the Olympics, looking at the International Olympic Committee as a great place to start, the International Olympic Committee oversees the Olympic Games. This is a nonprofit organization based in Lausanne, Switzerland. It might be a nonprofit, but it's incredibly profitable. It brings in billions and billions of dollars. It makes the rules for who gets to participate in the Olympics, which sports are in the Olympics, which games will be featured, where who will host the Olympics? They make those decisions.

[00:06:05] Hannah McCarthy

The International Olympic Committee, otherwise known as the IOC, gets that tax exempt nonprofit status. And because it's a non-disclosure Switzerland, I can't give you a breakdown of what it spends its money on, but it's worth noting that Olympic athletes receive very little financial support from the IOC. It's also worth noting that committee membership comprises a fair number of royals and corporate executives, and then you have the two hundred and six countries who participate in the Olympics. Each has a National Olympic Committee. Ours is called the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee.

[00:06:42] Nick Capodice

Team USA.

[00:06:43] Hannah McCarthy

Team USA. Oh, and just as an aside, we are one of the very few nations in the world that does not have a Ministry of Sports and does not federally fund our Olympic Committee, in part because we are one of the only countries in the world that debates the connection between politics and sports in other countries. That connection is explicitly acknowledged. There are, for example, left and right wing soccer clubs worldwide.

[00:07:08] Nick Capodice

I mean, our president throws the first pitch of the baseball season. We sing the national anthem at sporting events.

[00:07:14] Hannah McCarthy

We're about due, by the way, for quick dive into why we call elections races.

[00:07:19] Nick Capodice

Oh, absolutely, it is a sports metaphor.

[00:07:21] Hannah McCarthy

It is one hundred percent the sports metaphor. In Great Britain they called it a "standing." Anyway, the IOC would agree with all those politicians and franchise owners in the U.S. who assert that politics has no place in sports. It's literally on the books. You can find it in their charter, and we're going to get to that later. The Olympic Charter, by the way, that's the rules governing all Olympic operations. So here's how the Olympics have traditionally gone from a glint in a city's eye to the big event.

[00:07:50] Jules Boykoff

For many decades, cities would vie against each other for the right to host the Olympic Games. And often you'd see multiple cities going for one Olympics and they would make bids. They put together candidature files that said what they were going to do should they get the right to host the Olympics. And what would happen was after they would make their pitches. The International Olympic Committee members, the whole body around a hundred or so members currently would vote on which City gets to host the Olympic Games, and in years where it was competitive, it could be a really tight vote.

[00:08:26] Nick Capodice

You said the way they traditionally happen, so I'm going to guess that something changed.

[00:08:30] Jules Boykoff

This changed massively in 2017, when again, numerous cities were going for the 2024 Olympics, but one after the other dropped out. Here in the United States, we saw in Boston a vigorous and rigorous activist community teamed up with local politicians to raise big questions about the idea of hosting the Olympics.

[00:08:52] Archival

If you're like me, the idea of a Boston

[00:08:54] Archival

Olympics at first is kind of exciting. So why the only 40 percent of Massachusetts voters support Boston 2024.

[00:09:02] Jules Boykoff

Ultimately, decision makers elected officials in Boston handed back the bid that they had been handed by the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee.

[00:09:10] Hannah McCarthy

I remember this in part because I grew up near Boston, and to be honest, I got a little thrill by the idea of the Olympics coming to town. But the public polling was bad enough to convince the city to withdraw its bid. So Boston backed out and nearly everyone else had already dropped out at this point.

[00:09:28] Jules Boykoff

Only Los Angeles and Paris were still standing. And so at that time in 2017, they allocated the 2024 Olympics to Paris and the 2028 Olympics to Los Angeles.

[00:09:40] Nick Capodice

To how is it that the Olympics were just handed to Paris and L.A? Did residents of those two cities say they really wanted it?

[00:09:47] Jules Boykoff

Neither city had had a ballot measure where everyday residents of those cities were given an opportunity to weigh in to say whether they wanted to host the Olympics or not.

[00:09:56] Hannah McCarthy

It turns out that around a dozen Olympic bids were revoked between 2013 and 2018. The reason voting ballot measures at demands for a vote or someone winning office on an Anti-Olympic platform.

[00:10:11] Jules Boykoff

And so what the general trend is, whenever you see an outburst of democracy that tends to not benefit the International Olympic Committee, then all my days studying the Olympic Games. I have never once seen a grassroots democratic bid come from the ground up in society, where everyday working people in the city say, Hey, we really want to host the Olympics. Never have I seen that. Instead, it's always well-connected political and economic elites who figure they can use the Olympics to trampoline their careers or to make some money. I mean, there really is a lot of money sloshing through the system.

[00:10:46] Nick Capodice

But how does that work, exactly? If the Olympics are indeed largely unpopular with citizens, why would someone hoping to help their career even put in a bid?

[00:10:57] Hannah McCarthy

Well, it's still the Olympics. It's still a prestigious major event that draws the attention of nearly the entire world. I mean, if you're the mayor who brought the summer games to your city, you are someone who got something enormous done. And by the way, you're networking with the other elite folks in your city and people who work at the International and National Olympic Committees, you're meeting important people. You're also probably not going to be the person in charge anymore. By the time the Olympics come to town, so you are unlikely to be blamed for the downsides of hosting the Olympics.

[00:11:31] Nick Capodice

All right. And this is the part I need some help on. Jules is saying essentially that when you ask the voters if they want the Olympics, they tend to say, Heck, no. So why? What is so unappealing about hosting the Olympics in your hometown?

[00:11:50] Jules Boykoff

This goes all the way back to a really interesting case that a lot of people don't think about in the 1970s, when Denver was handed the 1976 Winter Olympics.

[00:12:01] Archival

The Denver Olympic story starts in a land of Olympian proportions.

[00:12:05] Jules Boykoff

Your listeners might be saying Denver 1976 Olympics. I don't remember those. That's because they never happened, because people across the political spectrum, from fiscal conservatives to more a left of center environmentalists got on the ballot, a measure that said we will give no public money to host these Olympic Games and guess what? They won. Conservatives, liberals and everyone in between turned out and voted down. Hosting the Olympics in Denver with public money. And so those games never happened in Denver, the International Olympic Committee was forced to move them to Innsbruck, Austria.

[00:12:42] Nick Capodice

Ok, I get that it's a money thing that's relatively easy to understand. We're going to spend massive amounts of public money is rarely a popular proposition with voters.

[00:12:52] Hannah McCarthy

That's only part of it. But yeah, hosting the Olympics means investing a huge amount of money into infrastructure. After all, you need somewhere to host the competitions so we can start there. Jules broke it down for me like this. There are four major issues that citizens worry about when it comes to hosting the Olympics.

[00:13:10] Jules Boykoff

Every single Olympics for which there is reliable data going all the way back to nineteen sixty has had cost overruns. In other words, I call this Etch-A-Sketch economics where in the bid phase of the Olympics, the people putting forth the bid say that it will only cost, say in the case of Tokyo, seven point three billion dollars. Then they get approved by the International Olympic Committee. They take that Etch A Sketch, they shake it up and they put a brand new number on it that is inevitably higher. In the case of Tokyo is around four times higher. I mean, estimates are in the neighborhood of \$30 billion were spent on the Tokyo Olympics. So from 7.3 Billion to \$30 billion.

[00:13:48] Nick Capodice

30 billion.

[00:13:50] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah. It's -

[00:13:51] Nick Capodice

30 billion. 30.

[00:13:52] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah.

[00:13:53] Nick Capodice

With a B.

[00:13:54] Hannah McCarthy

Yes. It's an immense amount of money. But I got to be clear here, the IOC does provide a chunk of that budget, but host cities are still responsible for the cost of venue construction, security, transport, medical services, customs and immigration and a bunch of other operational stuff.

[00:14:14] Nick Capodice

Oh, I remember 2016 watching the Brazil opening ceremony, and there's this moment when it was just supermodel Gisele Bundchen walking the length of the stadium. And the announcer is like, yeah, they had some last minute budget cuts.

[00:14:33] Jules Boykoff

A second trend the social scientists have identified is the militarization of public space

[00:14:38] Hannah McCarthy

In recent years. In particular, the Olympics have become an explicit terrorist target, not to mention the standard security risk that comes with a massive infusion of people, teams and spectators.

[00:14:50] Jules Boykoff

Essentially, local security forces use the Olympics like their own private cash machine, getting all the special weapons that they would never be able to get during normal political times. And they don't just return those after the Olympics. In fact, they keep them and they become part of everyday policing.

[00:15:07] Hannah McCarthy

And then there's this factor that I think often flies under the radar when a city wins an Olympic bid. The Olympic Village, the competition venues, those are going to have to go somewhere in that city, and that means moving people around.

[00:15:21] Jules Boykoff

There's also the displacement and eviction of everyday working people in the city. So when China hosted the Olympics back in 2008, one point five million people were displaced from their homes in order to make way for Olympic venues in Rio de Janeiro. For the twenty sixteen Olympics, there were seventy seven thousand people who were displaced to make way for the Olympics, even when the numbers aren't really high. The human cost is still very real. I visited Tokyo in July 2019, where I interviewed two women who are displaced by the 2020 Olympics. But not only were they displaced by the Twenty Twenty Olympics, they had actually previously been displaced by the nineteen sixty four Olympics, the same women. And so that social public housing complex of working people and working families was decimated. A community was decimated in Tokyo.

[00:16:15] Hannah McCarthy

On top of all this, cities will often make promises about how the Olympics will benefit a city long term, widespread improvements to housing and other infrastructure. And if you look at Atlanta, for example, that City really did see a boon from the 1996 Olympics. Certain areas improved and stayed that way, but long neglected low income communities tended not to see that same benefit. In fact, it was only those communities closest to the action of the games that got a makeover back in ninety six. Finally, the last major concern for cities, especially for activists equipped to push back against the Olympics.

[00:16:55] Jules Boykoff

The last trend that social scientists have pointed to more and more is the tendency to engage in greenwashing. In other words, promising big ecological gains in society by hosting the Olympics, but not really having much follow through. And again, Tokyo is really instructive in that sense. Originally, when they were to get the Olympics, they were telling the International Olympic Committee that these would be the quote recovery games that would help the affected areas around Fukushima that had been slammed by the triple whammy earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown to recover more quickly.

[00:17:29] Hannah McCarthy

The thing is, Jules interviewed people in Japan, elected officials, scholars, people on the street, and they said that hosting the Olympics actually slowed down the green recovery process. A lot of the equipment and materials needed to deal with that crisis in Fukushima were sent to Tokyo, where the Olympics were being held instead of staying where they were pretty desperately needed.

[00:17:52] Jules Boykoff

So because of those four trends, there are just simply fewer and fewer cities that are game to host the Olympic Games anymore.

[00:18:02] Nick Capodice

Wow. So at this stage, Hannah, I'm starting to cast about looking for the upside. We've heard the Olympics are expensive. They militarize public space. They displace communities and they fail to deliver on environmental improvements. So what does a successful Olympic season look like? Do we even have them?

[00:18:23] Jules Boykoff

So I've done a lot of research around the nineteen eighty four Olympics in Los Angeles. This is one that Olympic boosters often point to as one of the more successful Olympics, if you will.

[00:18:34] Archival

Welcome to the opening ceremonies of the Games at the 23rd Olympiad at Los Angeles.

[00:18:42] Jules Boykoff

First of all, we didn't lose a ton of money. They ended up with a small surplus. And if you talk to people in Los Angeles, some of them really do have a positive feeling about that.

[00:18:51] Hannah McCarthy

Some people, though, Jules means like the mayor of L.A., Eric Garcetti and fellow Olympic supporters media tycoon Casey Wasserman. So yeah, there are people who will say that there's a major upside, but there's always the other side of the coin.

[00:19:07] Jules Boykoff

I also interviewed lots of Latin X and African-American residents of Los Angeles who felt very different about those games. What they said when they thought about the nineteen eighty four Olympics was they remembered the words of the helicopter blades above their neighborhoods. They remember the machinery, the military. Her eyes, machinery that was brought in to keep activists at bay during the Olympics, who are trying to raise big questions about the spending around the 1984 Games and other elements. And so there's a real racialized remembrance of the Los Angeles Olympics, and we can't just brush the feelings and experiences of those folks under the table. We need to think about that as well.

[00:19:45] Hannah McCarthy

By the way, those same marginalized communities are looking at the 2028 L.A. Olympics with the memory of how they did not benefit and were in fact negatively impacted back in nineteen eighty four, which is why you see groups like no Olympics L.A. taking a stand against their city's games.

[00:20:02] Archival

And you know, our main mission is to stop the Olympic Games, not just from happening here in L.A, but just to educate people on why that's the thing that needs to happen.

[00:20:12] Hannah McCarthy

But I want to pivot here, Nick, because the way a city's residents feel about hosting the Olympics, that is just one piece of the political puzzle. What are the other motivating factors for hosting the Olympic Games? How are these games used as a political tool and what do the athletes remember them? Think about this? That's all coming up after the break. Before we dive back into the international intrigue that is the Olympic Games, I am here to tell you that there is a great deal of stuff that did not make it into this episode and it is good stuff. The Olympics have layers upon layers of complicated dynamics, and that makes sense because this is a global event. But the point is the stuff that didn't make it in. You want to hear it? Trust me. For example, what does it mean for one TV network to have exclusive broadcast rights for the Olympic Games? It means a lot, people and I want to tell you and I will and our next extra credit newsletter, we send it out every other week, and it's packed with the other stuff we are learning and the clips from the cutting room floor. You can subscribe right this very moment at our website civics101podcast.org. All right. Let the games begin.

[00:21:36] Nick Capodice

All right. Hannah, before the break, we heard about how the Olympics end up in a city and the impact of hosting for good or for ill. But it seems to me that the power of the Olympics extends beyond political hobnobbing and justifying major spending. So what else motivates cities to host them? What does it for them?

[00:21:55] Nancy Qian

For over a year now, I've actually been working on a research project about the motivation that governments have for holding the Olympics.

[00:22:06] Hannah McCarthy

This is Nancy Qian. She's a professor of economics and decision sciences at Northwestern. I spoke with her after reading an article she wrote called Good and Bad Olympic Nationalism. And she told me that over the course of her research, she's found that democracies tend to bid on the Olympic Games when they're doing well, economically speaking. But autocracies, a.k.a. governments where power is concentrated in one person's hand, are the opposite.

[00:22:31] Nancy Qian

Autocracies are more likely to bid for the Olympics bid and win, I should say so. These are meaningful bids when things aren't going well economically.

[00:22:40] Nick Capodice

Wow. So it's like, Hey, citizens pay no mind to the fact that things aren't going so well right now. We're going to try to host this flashy, distracting, prestigious event, which, by the way, is exactly what a bread and circus is. It's basically anything that superficially pleases people.

[00:22:57] Nancy Qian

Obviously, most bids are not successful, right? So the vast majority of bids are just signals that the country is interested. And maybe it gives the country some news headlines like, you know, we're going for it. This is something interesting to do. And maybe it distracts the country from other types of news. But most bids are not serious bids, right? They don't have a chance.

[00:23:22] Hannah McCarthy

This is an important factor. We can talk about the politics of hosting the Olympic Games and we will do more of that in just a moment. But that distinction is reserved for those nations who actually make the cut.

[00:23:34] Nancy Qian

I think so often we just focus all of our attention on the big power players, right? Like the economic political superpowers who are also the one getting the most medals. And also most often they host the Olympics more often than the other countries, right? So there's good reason for focus. But there's so many countries, most countries, there's over one hundred countries that go to the Olympics. Most of them will never host the Olympics. Most countries don't win medals actually like any medals. And then for these countries, the Olympics are an entirely different experience,

[00:24:13] Hannah McCarthy

And it's in that entirely different experience that you can find the difficult to measure positive vibes principle. What good can the Olympics do, especially when you are not the one hosting the games?

[00:24:25] Nancy Qian

Researchers have shown using data from soccer games that, for example, for African countries competing together is really good for national unity, so it is still about patriotism and national unity. But it doesn't seem to have that negative element of international competition with other countries, which makes sense because they're not really contenders, right?

[00:24:50] Nick Capodice

I would imagine that there's this sense of being sort of the David to the Goliath of the world's best sports teams, and that's something to bond over with other nations who are in the same boat as you. And also, you do get to play with the major contenders, and that's got to feel good.

[00:25:06] Nancy Qian

All countries that go to international sporting games can get a big boost of patriotism and nationalism and bonding. But the political effect of that binding differs depending on where on the political spectrum of power you are, right? So if you're a weak state, that's fractionalized coming out of years of civil war, you know, competing in the Olympics. This is a moment of building solidarity for your country, which is good, right? By and large.

[00:25:33] Nick Capodice

Oh yeah Hannah, this makes me think of South Sudan joining the 2016 Olympics, it was a huge deal because here you had this newly independent nation asserting its place on the world stage.

[00:25:46] Archival

And a person that never heard about South Sudan or never see South Sudanese, to see that we are a new country. And also we need...

[00:25:53] Hannah McCarthy

I do want to touch on this contender question this idea that some nations are simply not contenders? Developing nations might not be meaningful contenders because their economic and political environment is not conducive to training and supporting their athletes. And there have been calls for the IOC to create a separate Olympic Games for developing nations or to build central training grounds for athletes who don't have access to them at home. Still, as it is now, these non contenders do stand to get something out of participation in the Olympic Games.

[00:26:26] Nancy Qian

So really, it's more about a shared experience of being at the Games together, something that you've been doing, something you've been training for years that can actually build solidarity between people from different countries as well as different groups within countries, right?

[00:26:42] Hannah McCarthy

For example, take the infamous divide of the Cold War. It was enough for the U.S. to boycott the Olympics in the Soviet Union and then for the Soviet Union to turn around and do the same to us. When the Cold War came to an end, Soviet and American athletes were face to face for the first time in a long time.

[00:26:59] Archival

They're not one of the better serving teams in the world, and they can put a little pressure on the Soviets. They can make some points...

[00:27:03] Nancy Qian

All of a sudden, you know, athletes who weren't allowed to talk to each other before, like the floodgates were open, and it turned out that all they had were like, these really positive feelings about the other athlete. So this sort of gives you the sense that a lot of the politics surrounding it is manufactured by the government and the media. My sense is that it's easier for the smaller countries because there's less incentives for governments and media to create tension, create political tension or magnify existing tensions.

[00:27:37] Nick Capodice

Ok, Hannah, speaking of magnifying tensions, I have to ask about what is going on as we speak, which is a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, China.

[00:27:49] Archival

A diplomatic boycott now of the Beijing Olympics over China's crackdown on democracy and human rights abuses.

[00:27:56] Nick Capodice

The United States announced it first and then Canada, Australia and the UK followed suit. And from what I understand, China was not happy about it.

[00:28:06] Archival

Yeah, David, they are calling this one pure political provocation, and they are now threatening countermeasures, though they are not specifying what those are....

[00:28:13] Nick Capodice

So my first question is this does a boycott mean that we're not going to go to the Olympics at all?

[00:28:18] Hannah McCarthy

Great question. It did. Once upon a time, I mentioned the U.S. boycott of the Soviet Olympic Games during the Cold War. That was a boycott in which even athletes were not permitted to attend the games, and we're not doing that this time.

[00:28:32] Nancy Qian

I actually talked to some former Olympians about it. I just happened to have an opportunity and they were like, This is nothing like the Cold War, right? Because the Cold War, they didn't let the athletes go, and that was terrible for the athletes. That was a huge cost for the athlete. That was a price that was paid to make a huge political gesture.

[00:28:55] Hannah McCarthy

In 1980, the Olympic Games were taking place in Moscow. The Soviet Union had recently invaded Afghanistan, and President Jimmy Carter set a deadline for Soviet troops to withdraw when they didn't make that deadline. Carter said, OK, we're boycotting the Olympics

[00:29:09] Jimmy Carter

Human rights and who believe in peace. Let our voices be heard in an absolutely clear way and not add the imprimatur of approval to the Soviet Union and its government.

[00:29:22] Hannah McCarthy

And not only that, any American athlete who attempted to attend the games under, say, a neutral banner would have their passport revoked.

[00:29:31] Nick Capodice

And what does it move like that say to the rest of America?

[00:29:34] Hannah McCarthy

Well, a lot of Americans pitied those athletes who couldn't compete. They were Olympians without the Olympics. Still, Carter was saying, we will in no way appear to support an anti-democratic regime. This was an acknowledgment of the political power gesture of going to the Olympics, of sitting with other leaders and diplomats and shaking hands and smiling while your country's athletes display their elite skill, which, by the way, brings me to a boycott that did not happen,

[00:30:05] Nancy Qian

Such as the one in Berlin where people in hindsight thinks maybe someone should have banned it. But we all went. Everybody went the entire Western world who ended up at war with each other later all went and participated and celebrated.

[00:30:19] Archival

And meanwhile, a packed

[00:30:20] Speaker3

Stadium and flag draped cheering streets greet Chancellor Hitler on his way to perform the opening ceremony.

[00:30:25] Hannah McCarthy

This is the 1936 Berlin Olympics, also known as Hitler's Olympics, and it started the first meaningful Olympic boycott movement in the United States. A lot of Americans were opposed to attending. Here's Jules Boykoff again.

[00:30:41] Jules Boykoff

The boycott movement was widely supported in the United States, certainly by Jewish groups who could see the writing on the Wall already with what Hitler was doing after his rise in 1933. But it was really gaining steam even among certain athlete groups in the United States as well.

[00:30:57] Hannah McCarthy

The quote boycott movement was widely publicly discussed leading up to the 1936 Berlin Olympics. What message will it send if we send our athletes to Berlin? Will that legitimize this burgeoning Nazi regime?

[00:31:11] Jules Boykoff

So what happened was the American Olympic honchos decided to send over a guy named Avery Brundage on a Fact-Finding mission to Berlin to figure out what was actually going on there. Well, Brundage, it should be said, was very pro-Nazi, very pro Germany. He was wine and dined by the Germans. He had his own translators, which were, of course, Nazi approved translators. And guess what? He comes back to the United States and says there's nothing to see there. Everything is going to be fine. And of course, don't even need to worry about this anyways, because the Olympics are neutral, they are not political. And so we have nothing to fear here.

[00:31:47] Hannah McCarthy

Of course, that wasn't true. And closer to the games, it became apparent that there was in fact vehement anti-Jewish sentiment in Germany leading up to the Berlin games.

[00:31:56] Jules Boykoff

And in fact, the president of the International Olympic Committee at the time account, named Henry Bilat, later was alarmed by the anti-Jewish signage that he saw in the countryside as he traveled to those Winter Olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. And he requested directly to Hitler that he get those signs down because they were going to do no good for the Olympic Games or really humanity more generally.

[00:32:23] Hannah McCarthy

Mind you, Hitler was not really into sports. He was not convinced that he should go along with the IOC. Ultimately, Joseph Goebbels, his propaganda minister, convinced him to end. Germany then got to use the Olympic Games in a number of ways, for example, and this one blew my mind. It was the Germans who invented the modern Olympic torch relay.

[00:32:45] Archival

Berlin's great day dawns with the arrival of the Olympic flame at the end of its 2000 mile journey from Greece.

[00:32:50] Jules Boykoff

At that time, it was basically a scouting mission to figure out who are you are going to invade next for Germany and if you see where the torch went. Those were countries that were soon conquered, many of them.

[00:33:02] Nick Capodice

Seriously? Why did I not know that little piece of information?

[00:33:06] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah, I hadn't either. Apparently, Hitler also saw this relay is a great way to tie the Olympic Games to their Greek roots, which was important to him because he saw a link between ancient Greece and the Aryan race. And then, of course, there's the fact that the Olympics meant major media coverage for Nazi Germany.

[00:33:22] Jules Boykoff

The New York Times wrote glowingly of Hitler as one of the great leaders of our time after those Olympic Games. And so, you know, people who are following those Olympics were high on the five ring supply, if you will, at the time. And it really helped Hitler and gave him more space to maneuver politically moving forward.

[00:33:41] Nick Capodice

All right. So if we want to look at exactly how politically powerful the Olympics are, this seems like the perfect example. The major power players of the world, including the United States, attend these games hobnob with Nazis, and it really helps that regime on the global scale.

[00:33:59] Jules Boykoff

There's a lot of people wondering, are we essentially doing the same when we allow Russia to host the Olympics in twenty fourteen or China in twenty twenty two? And hey, there's plenty of people that are concerned about that. The Olympics are being held in the United States, which has eight hundred military bases around the world, it must be said, whereas China only has three who's the United States spends a huge amount of money on its military compared to these other countries. And so I think in fairness, that needs to be brought into the frame as well. When we're talking about these Olympic Games and the processes of democracy and how it can help forces in society that are anti-democratic gain a foothold through hosting the Olympic Games.

[00:34:43] Hannah McCarthy

All right, so now we're going to move away from the politicians, the nation states the potential invasions, the diplomacy to the athletes, the actual Olympians at the heart of these games. How did their politics fit or not within the Olympics? That's coming up after the break.

[00:35:03] Nick Capodice

But first, just a quick reminder that Civics 101 is a listener-supported show. Go to our website civics101podcast.org, click the donate button with whatever amount is good for you and you'll get a gold medal in our eyes.

[00:35:20] Hannah McCarthy

Welcome back to Civics 101. We're talking the politics of the Olympics, including the politics of the people at the very heart of these games, the athletes, we know these games are a way to connect with other great athletes that for the competitors, the political divides of their nation are insignificant in the face of their mutual respect for others who train as hard as they do, who are a part of their very small club. But Olympians themselves figure it out a while ago that they too can use these games as a platform just as their home countries do.

[00:35:56] Jules Boykoff

That epic moment of political dissent where John Carlos and Tommie Smith stood on the medal stand in Mexico City and thrust their black gloved fists into the Mexico City sky, while the person who plays second to gentleman from Australia named Peter Norman, a white guy from Australia, stood in solidarity wearing a button that said, OK, Air Olympic project for human rights.

[00:36:18] Archival

There were some boos in the stadium last night. ABC Sports Editor Howard Cosell spoke to Tommie Smith after he accepted his gold medal.

[00:36:27] Tommie Smith

The right glove that I wore on my right hand signifies the power within Black America, the left glove. My teammate, John Carlos, who on his left hand made an arc, my right hand to his left hand also signify black unity.

[00:36:47] Nick Capodice

Yes, I know this moment very well. Carlos and Smith gave the black power salute. Smith later said that for him, it was the human rights salute. And it turned out that despite not giving the same salute, Peter Norman from Australia was in full support of their demonstration,

[00:37:02] Hannah McCarthy

And this is still considered one of the most overtly political moments of modern Olympic history. And it really damaged Carlos and Smith's careers.

[00:37:12] Jules Boykoff

And so, of course, the International Olympic Committee was in freakout mode after that happened, and they put loads of pressure on the United States Olympic Committee to give Carlos and Smith the boot from the Olympic Village, which is exactly what happened.

[00:37:25] Hannah McCarthy

This highlights, by the way, the dissonance between the way that nations use the games and the expectations that the games themselves will be nonpolitical, that sports are inherently neutral, an insistence that the IOC eventually put on the books. So you had the Carlos and Smith moment in 1968, and then in 1972, Wayne Vincent Matthews and Wayne Collette stood on the medal stand and sort of disinterestedly spun their medals around on their fingers.

[00:37:53] Jules Boykoff

The point is, after those two outbursts by U.S. African-American athletes in comradeship with other athletes, the IOC decided to put this rule on the books.

[00:38:05] Hannah McCarthy

This is Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter. It bans any form of political demonstration during the games.

[00:38:13] Jules Boykoff

And athletes are more and more aware of it, especially today, because I think it's fair to say we're living in what could be called the athlete empowerment era, where more athletes are standing up and socially conscious, politically motivated ways. And so the International Olympic Committee is certainly aware of that and is continuing to stand by this rule, even as it has made minor minor modifications along the way, which is what we saw in Tokyo, for example, when it allowed a little bit more space for athletes to express themselves. And what I mean by that is they adjusted the rule whereby athletes could speak out on issues or take a political stand before their competition began. And that's why you saw with some of the women's soccer games at the Tokyo Olympics, all the athletes taking a knee before the game. Now, you still couldn't do it during the game and you still couldn't do it on the medal stand.

[00:39:05] Hannah McCarthy

Jules made this point near the end of our conversation, and for me, this really gets to the heart of, you know, how do we use the Olympics? What are they? Are they a celebration of athleticism, a deep commitment and sacrifice? Yes, absolutely. Do I drive an inimitable sense of awe when watching the world's greatest athletes do their thing? I do. Many of us do. And the Olympics are a platform participating nations find a way to use this platform. And some of the athletes at the heart of these games do the same thing or try to even if they're not really allowed,

[00:39:50] Jules Boykoff

Even that didn't stop an amazing and I think epic act of political dissent from happening in Tokyo when the U.S. athlete Raven Saunders put her arms in a shape of an X on the medal stand to represent oppressed people across the world.

[00:40:07] Raven Saunders

We kind of decided that the X was going to be like a sign of our sign of, you know, and what it stood for for us. And leading up to that podium standoff I was like, eh, all right I was like, all right, it's time.

[00:40:22] Jules Boykoff

And it was a powerful, powerful moment. And fortunately, the International Olympic Committee did not crack down on Raven Saunders, in part because her mother was very ill at that time and they decided not to lash out with a penalty. It would have been even uncouth for them. And but the point is, you really can't put athlete activism into the bottle despite these kind of rules against it. It is not going to stop some athletes from taking a stand.

[00:40:53] Nick Capodice

The IOC's position here sounds not totally dissimilar to what's happening in the U.S. right now with the intersection between sports and politics. You've got the people in power, which are politicians, sports league elites, franchise owners predominantly insisting that political demonstration or affiliation has no place on the field or the court. And then, on the other hand, you have athletes using their platform to take a stand. And specifically, in the U.S., these are athletes of color, and they're drawing attention to racial injustice.

[00:41:26] Hannah McCarthy

Right? It's a raging debate. On the one hand, athletes are vilified for taking a knee during the national anthem at an NFL game. On the other hand, the NFL insists that the national anthem be played. On the one hand, the IOC demands athletes keep politics off the medal stand. On the other, the Olympics are a series of political decisions from beginning to end. And just a reminder, by the way, that other nations around the world make no buts about the connection between politics and sports.

[00:41:56] Jules Boykoff

Let's not forget, despite everything I've been talking about with you here, Hannah. The Olympics are tremendously popular in the public sphere. So long as they are not happening in your city, then big questions tend to get raised, but otherwise they still are popular. Billions of people will tune in to watch them, which means that's a stage of billions of people that could see your political message if you're an athlete willing to share it on that big stage.

[00:42:34] Hannah McCarthy

This episode was produced by me, Hannah McCarthy, with Nick Capodice. Our staff includes Christina Phillips and Jacqui Fulton. Rebecca Lavoie is our executive producer. Music in this episode by Ketsa, Metre, Xylo Zico, Mello-C and the inimitable John Williams. You can check out all of our episodes and more at Civics101podcast.org and make sure to never miss an update on how our democracy and government works. Follow our podcast on iTunes, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts. Civics 101 is a production of NHPR, New Hampshire Public Radio.

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